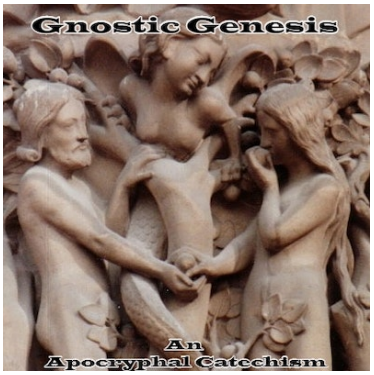
THE ODD PAST PODCAST

Gnostic Genesis

MARCH 24, 2020



Historical Blindness

Gnostic Genesis (An A…

A look at Gnosticism, a school of thought within early Christianit…

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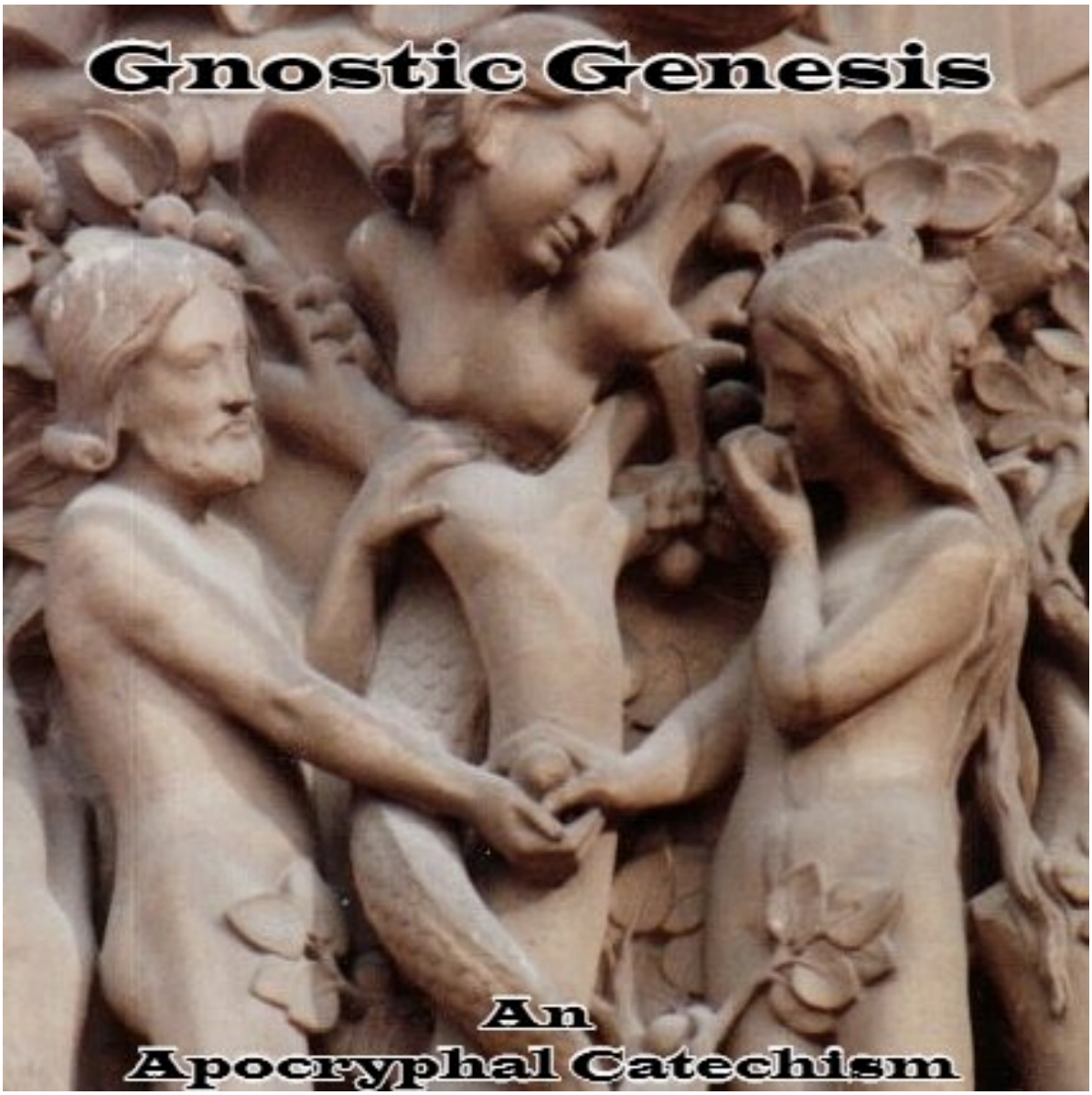
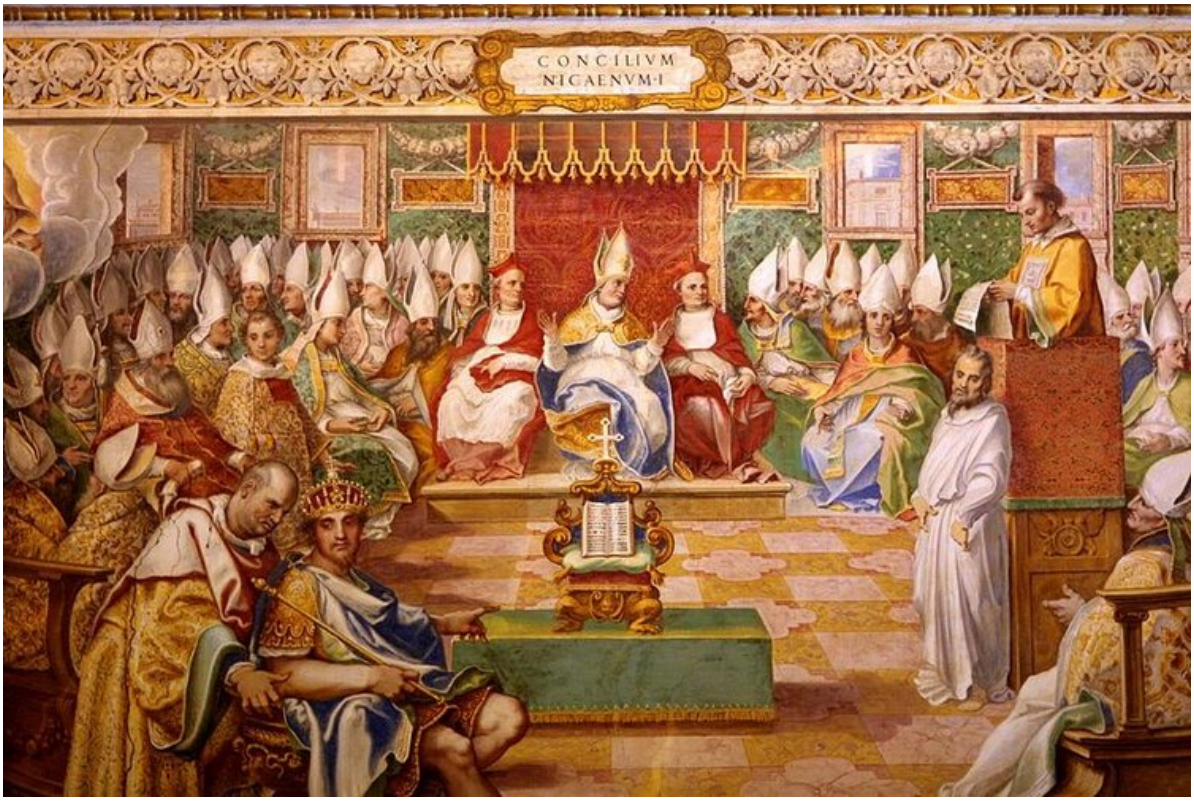


In 312 CE, while locked in a desperate struggle for control of the Roman Empire, Constantine I is said by such chroniclers as Lactantius and Eusebius of Caesarea to have had a vision sent to him by the god of the Christians, a sect that had lately been persecuted in the eastern regions of the empire. According to the legend, Constantine placed the sign of their god on his soldiers' shields--the chi-ro, being the first two letters of Christ's name in Greek.

After going on to victory at the battle of Milvian Bridge and consolidating his power as the sole emperor, Constantine converted to Christianity, and he involved himself a great deal in the affairs of his new church. In 325 CE, it was Constantine who organized the first Ecumenical Council at Nicaea, in what is modern day Turkey, bringing together bishops from across the world to address controversies in Christian doctrine and reach a consensus. While variant forms of Christianity had for years been debated and denounced as heresy, this council marks the beginning of an official process of canonization, settling once and for all the contours of orthodox Christian belief. The process would not conclude for quite some time. The best milestone we have for the final settling of canon comes in 367 CE when the bishop Athanasius of Alexandria dispatched his customary Festal letter to establish the date of Easter and decided to throw in a list of which books were to be accepted as true Scripture, a list that reflects the canonical New Testament as the church accepts it today. But what were the so-called heretical beliefs that church fathers suppressed? What stories did these banned books of the bible have to tell? And did they have any better claim to inclusion in the Scriptures than those that remain?

In this installment, we focus on the Christian apocrypha of Gnosticism, since Gnostic thought is of such importance to so many topics I've covered. Notions regarding Gnostic heresy came up in my very first Halloween Special, the Specter of Devil Worship, and again just recently in my patron exclusive episode on the accusations made against the Knights Templar. Indeed, we will certainly see it come up again in future entries of my Encyclopedia Grimoria on the history of magic. But there are many traditions and doctrines to choose from when considering the apocrypha, for early Christianity was exceedingly diverse. There were the Ebionites, whose name is a mystery in that they may have been named after a person or after the Hebrew word for "poor." These were Jews who accepted Christ as the messiah, but only as their savior, arguing that one needed to be Jewish to be saved by him. Then there were the Marcionites, who were certainly named after their founder, a second century teacher who conversely taught that true Christians must reject all things Jewish, even going so far as to suggest that the God of the New Testament was a different deity, come to undo the cruelties perpetrated by the God of the Jews. Then there was Arianism, a heresy that led directly to the convening of the Council of Nicaea. Arianists followed the teachings of Arius of Alexandria, who denied that Christ was one and the same as God but was rather one of God's creations, in opposition to the Homoousian concept that the Son and the Father were the "same in essence" and the docetic doctrine that Christ's physical human body was merely an illusion. Nor was this diversity of conflicting doctrines peculiar to Christianity. Judaism had its own centuries-long process of doctrinal dispute and settling of canon and therefore has its own apocrypha as well. During their periods of domination under the Persians and then the Hellenistic Kingdoms and under Roman rule and across the Diaspora, different forms and sects of Judaism gradually developed, some with their own texts that

came to be considered apocryphal, with specific movements in the Second Temple period being the Sadducees, the Essenes, and the Pharisees, the latter being the group whose beliefs eventually became the basis of mainstream, Rabbinic Judaism. However, in and among many of these sects and doctrines, Jewish and Christian alike, can be discerned strains of that belief system Gnosticism, which might be depicted as an alternate interpretation of established doctrines, as a sort of philosophy intertwined with religion, as a mythical expansion of theological concepts, complete with its own creation myth and detailed cosmogony, or, as it is usually characterized, as heresy.



The Council of Nicaea, via Wikimedia Commons

At this point, it becomes necessary to clarify some terminology. In these sessions, we may often throw around terms such as heresy, orthodoxy, canon, pseudepigrapha, and of course, apocrypha. It is essential that these labels not be misunderstood, so we shall begin with the term canon. The word “canon” derives from a Greek word having to do with measurement, literally a rod or straight edge used to measure, but in its religious and literary sense, it came to be associated with some standard, specifically in regard to the judgment of texts. Thus if something is “in the canon” or “canonized,” it means that it has been deemed to conform to certain norms or to meet some discerning standards. This term is necessarily used in conjunction with the term “orthodox,” which comes from the combination of the Greek *orthos*, meaning true or correct, and *doxy*, opinion or belief, thus literally “correct belief.”

Texts deemed worthy of canonization are those that espouse beliefs that are “correct,” and here we see the subjectivity of this notion, for what measuring rod could possibly be used to determine which beliefs are correct in matters of faith? Who can be so discerning as to decide which ideas are orthodox, or right, which simply heterodox, or different, and which heretical? The term heresy itself is harder to pin down. It appears to derive from the Greek word for choice, indicating some purposeful decision to believe wrong things, but of course, those deemed heretics never really think that what they believe is wrong, so it is only a label placed on minority beliefs, i.e. any beliefs that deviate from consensus or the norm. Some of these divergent beliefs are associated with specific apocryphal texts, as we shall see, but the term “apocrypha” does not necessarily denote heresy. The word is derived from the Greek *apokryphos*, meaning hidden or obscured, and thus secret, but this term doesn’t really apply to many so-called apocryphal texts, which were never significantly suppressed. Indeed some apocrypha have even been accepted as “deuterocanonical,” meaning they are part of a second canon. Thus, for some, the secret or hidden element of the term refers to works written by an author whose identity is unknown, but as mentioned in my episode on Zoroaster, there is another term for these, “pseudepigrapha,” and this definition of apocrypha doesn’t work in all cases either, for there are numerous canonical books of the Bible that scholars argue were not written by the people by whom they claim to have been authored, such as 1 and 2 Timothy, 2 Peter, and Titus, and there are still others whose authorship remains a mystery. I discussed one example of this in my episode on the authorship of the Gospel of John and the identity of the Beloved Disciple. What exactly does it mean to refer to a text as an apocryphon? Only that the work is considered non-canonical, with at least some implication that it contains false teachings or doubtful claims about the past. But this too cannot be considered a standard evaluation, as there are different canons, among different religions and sects, some of which include works excluded by others.

Essentially any Christian canon, however, would certainly exclude works espousing apparent Gnostic doctrine, for it was long viewed as an insidious heresy, prompting the church to undertake extensive efforts to root it out, which meant destroying the books that promoted it. Unlike other heretical sects, Gnosticism appears to have grown within more orthodox communities of believers, shared by one initiate with another like a kind of secret society in the heart of traditional Christianity. Gnostic beliefs emphasize the special power of knowledge, or *gnosis*, hence the name given to them, and when one became initiated into Gnostic circles, they imparted some rather complicated and astounding ideas that must have seemed like a true revelation about the spiritual world. It seems very much like Masonic initiation that way, a secret society that promises “more light” with each further step into their mysteries. And also like Freemasonry, for a long time we didn’t have much in the way of concrete knowledge regarding what they believed. Everything we had received was from writings denouncing them as heretics and criticizing their doctrines as false, for the Gnostic

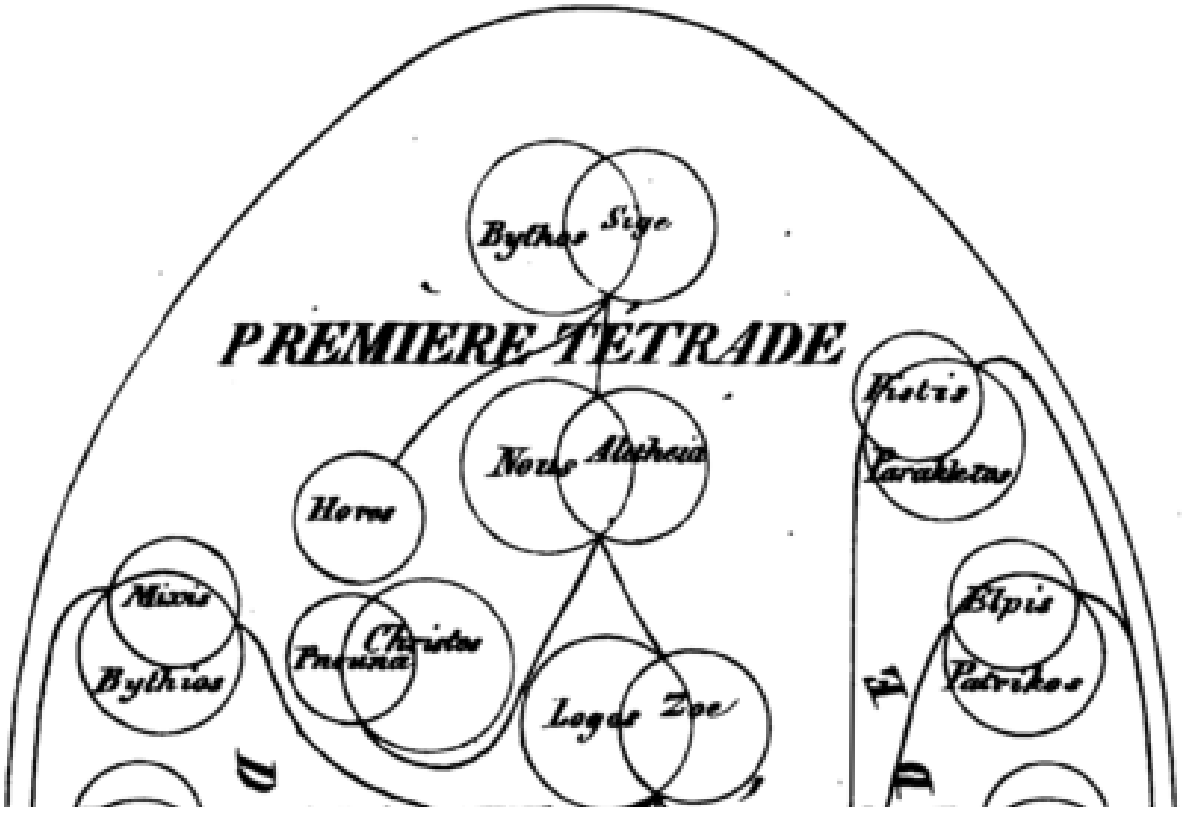
texts themselves had disappeared due to efforts at stamping out this heresy. That all changed in 1945, though, when only a year and a half prior to the Dead Sea Scrolls' discovery, one Mohammed Ali, leader of a group of bedouin fieldhands, discovered a human skeleton and a large earthenware jar while digging for fertilizer along the Nile. Ali and his men did not want to open the sealed jar at first, fearing that it contained a jinn, or evil spirit, but their curiosity, which tantalized them with dreams of treasure, eventually got the better of them. Opening it, they discovered a trove of leatherbound volume that has come to be known as the Nag Hammadi library, after the town nearest its discovery. Ali tried to divide the books like treasure among the group, even tearing some of them to more evenly distribute them, but since his men refused to take them, he kept them all himself and carried them home. Still with only an inkling that they might be worth money, he left the priceless artifacts in an animal pen, except the pages that he allowed his mother to burn as kindling. The ancient codices would not come into the hands of someone who truly knew their worth until a month later, when after brutally murdering a man he believed had previously killed his own father, Ali gave them to a priest to prevent them from being seized by authorities when they inevitably searched his home. The priest's brother-in-law, a History teacher in local parochial schools, took a volume to Cairo to sell it, and because of this, the find eventually came to the attention of the Coptic Museum there, and because of subsequent study and translation, we have numerous Gnostic treatises that had not been previously known to exist.

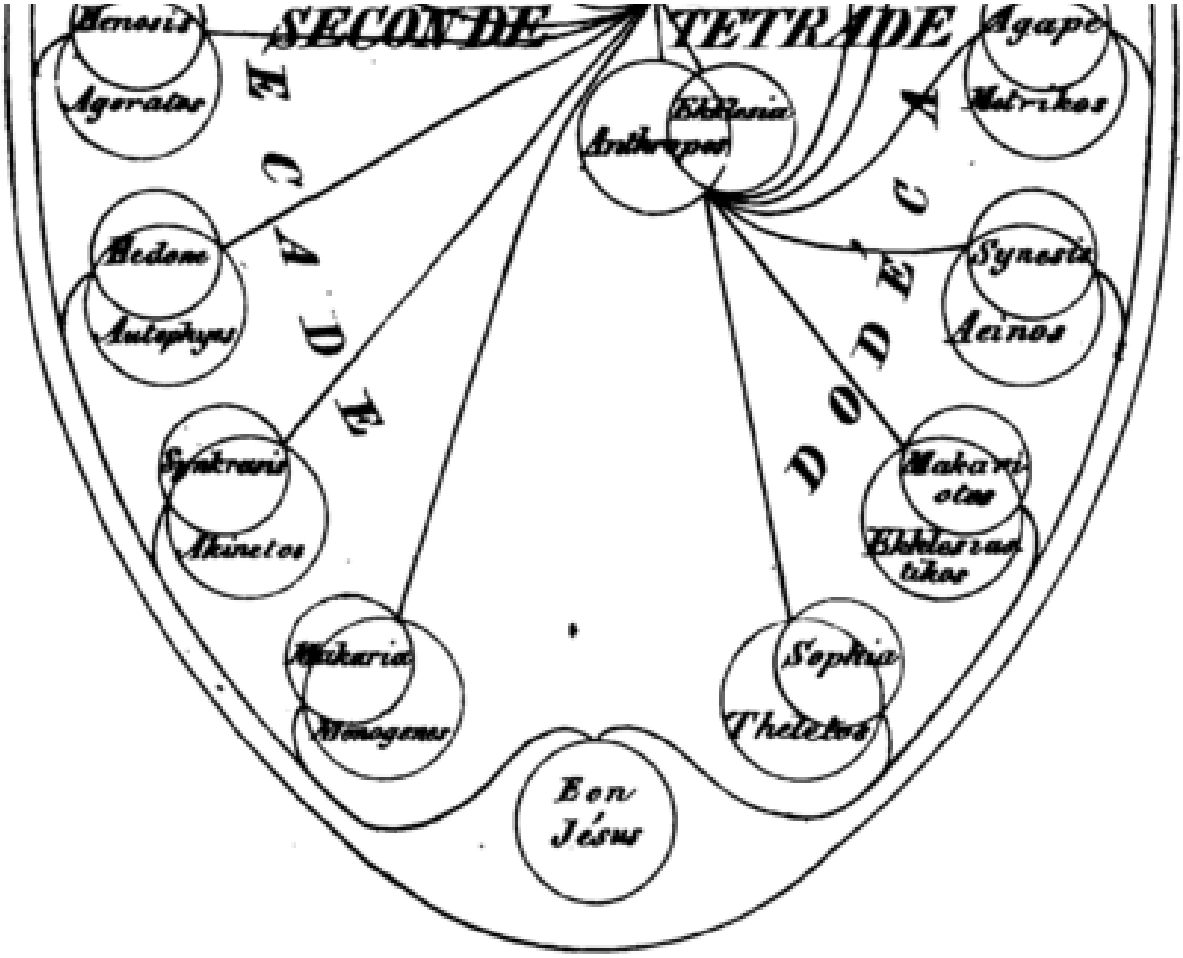
One Gnostic codex found at Nag Hammadi (The Apocryphon of John), via Wikimedia Commons

The codices contained in the Nag Hammadi library have been dated to around 348 CE, which goes a long way toward explaining why they were buried in the first place. Recall that the letter of Athanasius establishing canon was sent about twenty years after that. It has been suggested, then, that monks at a nearby monastery in Nag Hammadi, after having been told not to use these Gnostic texts, chose to bury them, perhaps because they valued their teachings too much to simply burn them and wanted to preserve them for posterity. However, the presence of a skeleton beside them does raise the further question of whether they had been deposited as part of some common burial ceremony, perhaps laid to rest with some Gnostic believer because he treasured them, or perhaps even tossed like so much garbage into the grave of a heretic who had been put to death. This we will never know. The 4th century CE date of the codices also cannot tell us anything about the origins of the Gnostic beliefs forever preserved inside, for just because the books were made after 348 CE does not mean the texts it contains are only that old. Indeed, aside from the Gnostic works, there were others present in the jar that are known to have been written far earlier, such as Plato's *Republic*, which was composed sometime in the 4th century BCE. So when did Gnostic thought first show up? Orthodox Christians through the centuries, especially heresiologists, have suggested that it, along with all Christian heresies, originated with one very famous heretic: Simon Magus. In the Book of Acts, a magus, meaning a sorceror, is said to have dwelled in Samaria, deceiving people through his dark arts into believing he was divine. Seeing the miracles of the Apostles, he attempted to bribe them, that he might have their power, but was chastised. Outside of this canonical account, the story of Simon Magus was further fleshed out by early Christian writers Justin Martyr, who suggested that Simon Magus continued in his ways, passing himself off as God through his displays of magic, and Irenaeus, who explicitly claimed that Simon Magus originated Gnosticism with the claims that he was a the divine bringer of the secret knowledge needed for salvation, and that he had brought with him to the earthly realm the "Primal Thought," an essence of the true God personified in a woman named Helen, whom Irenaeus explained was merely a prostitute that Simon Magus traveled with. This is really the only narrative explanation for the origin of Gnosticism, and it is itself entirely apocryphal.

In order to comprehend some of the claims attributed to Simon Magus as well as to reach some further understanding of Gnosticism's origins, we must examine its central tenets. The knowledge revealed to Gnostic initiates appears to have come in the form of an alternate

cosmogony that can be summarized as follows. Gnostic texts describe, or rather fail to describe, the one true eternal deity, who is ineffable, indescribable, incomprehensible. From this original god, sometimes called the Monad in correspondence with Pythagorean philosophical notions, there generated divine essences, called Aeons. Here again the influence of Greek philosophy can be discerned, for the concept appears to be that the one god could not be the only thing in existence, since as this god pondered, its thought also existed and so became a thing unto itself, and since this god lived, its life existed, etc. So the Aeons were emanations of the one ineffable god. Different systems of Gnostic thought had it that these Aeons combined in male and female pairs thereafter generating their own emanations, all of which coexisted in the divine realm called the Pleroma, or the Fullness. Eventually one of these later generation Aeons, called Sophia, or Wisdom, created an emanation without her male counterpart--a kind of virgin birth. This offspring was aberrant and imperfect, prompting Sophia to hide it from the other Aeons in a lower plane of existence. It is this being, whom she named Yaldabaoth, that would become the Judeo-Christian God of the Bible, his name very similar to Yahweh, Lord of Sabbaths. Thus according to Gnostic teaching, this abortive spirit Yaldabaoth creates evil emanations of his own, demonic forces called Archons or Rulers, and thereafter, creates the material world. As the creator, he is sometimes called the Demiurge, again showing some crossover with Greek philosophy and cosmogony, which in some schools of thought conceived of an artisan deity who was separate from God proper and responsible for crafting the physical universe. More importantly, though, in explaining why Gnosticism was considered heretical, it asserted that the God of the Old Testament was in fact not the one true God but rather a lesser being.





A diagram of Aeons in the Pleroma, via Wikimedia Commons

Indeed, a retelling of the story of Genesis laid out in two texts discovered at Nag Hammadi, *The Hypostasis of the Archons* and an untitled treatise commonly referred to as *On the Origin of the World*, make it clear that Yaldabaoth was not just a lesser deity. Rather, he was like a reckless and jealous child, and along with his demonic emanations, the Archons, was the source of all evil. Having glimpsed the one true God, Yaldabaoth creates the first man, Adam, in his image, but he is a mere lifeless model. Sophia sends her daughter Zoe to breathe a spark of divinity into him. Zoe is also called Eve, thus the Eve of Gnostic mythology is herself divine. The Archons, furious that Eve has made mankind superior to them, plan to rape her, but Eve disappears into the tree in the Garden of Eden, leaving only a likeness of herself behind with Adam. Eve entering and dwelling in the Tree of Knowledge identifies her with the serpent of the Garden of Eden myth. This may sound misogynistic, taking the orthodox view that Eve corrupted Adam to a further extreme, but in the Gnostic story of Genesis, the serpent is wise above all creatures and the knowledge it imparts is not evil. Indeed, elsewhere in these Gnostic texts it is stated that Sophia herself became the Serpent and entered the garden so that she could instruct Adam and Eve. Therefore the dialogue that appears in canonical Genesis to be an insidious manipulation of the first man and

woman into disobeying their Creator in Gnostic mythology becomes the heroic act of Sophia in awakening Adam and Eve to the truth that their Creator may not know what is best for them and may even be keeping the truth from them. Here we see the central tenet of Gnosticism writ large: mankind's ascendance beyond the material plane and out of the power of the evil Archons that trouble us and the foolish god that created us requires knowledge. Gnosticism suggests that we have divinity within us and need only the knowledge, or gnosis, of our divinity to save us.

Now the purpose of Gnostic theology can be discerned, even if its point of origin cannot. All of Gnosticism, though taking Judaism as its premise, rejects Judaic doctrines, inverting them. Why is that? What would prompt this simultaneous acceptance and repudiation? It can be seen as a natural progression, the next step in the evolution of a worldview. As my principal source, *Lost Christianities* by Bart Ehrman points out, Judeo-Christian religion has always been a response to the suffering of mankind, a way to explain why it happens and how we might overcome it. From the beginning, in the Exodus narrative, it is clear that the Israelites were chosen by God and that God would intervene when they needed His help most, even parting the seas for them if need be. The problem, then, was to explain why God did *not* intervene at other times to prevent their suffering. Originally, Judaic thought held that they suffered as a direct result of their sin. Of course God did not intervene to reduce their suffering then, for it was His punishment meted out from on high. This explanation worked, until the people were doing God's will, keeping his commandments, and *still* suffering. To account for this, another power was needed, a source of evil that could be blamed for the bad that happened. Enter, the Devil. This figure is not present throughout all the Hebrew scriptures, contrary to popular belief, but rather appears to have developed as a revisionist doctrine, explicated most clearly in Job, as a way to explain the suffering mankind endures. By this view, God created the world and might intervene, but his adversary was free to trouble us during our time here, and God might or might not intervene, whether because of our sin, or because of a desire to test our faith, or because of more mysterious reasons. However, this view, further developed by prophets and by Christ himself, presented an apocalyptic conclusion, assuring that while this may be the case presently, it would, before long, reach its conclusion when God redeemed the world. Bart Ehrman in *Lost Christianities* suggests that, when the end did not come, when this imminent conclusion to their earthly suffering never arrived, some sought yet another explanation. Thus Gnosticism focuses on the material world that Yaldabaoth created and trapped mankind in as the true cause of suffering. Living in these physical bodies, in this physical existence that Gnostics called "the chaos," is suffering, and our creator, the god of the Old Testament, does not intervene because he is the author of our suffering, who keeps us "imprisoned in that dwelling place of endless calamities." Rather than seeking some reprieve from suffering, the Gnostics found a way to accept it as the status quo.

The Devil bargains with God over Job's faith in Duomo, by Bartolo di Fredi, photo by Livio Andronico, licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license

While this may sound bleak, it must be remembered that the Gnostics too kept a view to a better existence in the divine realm, among Aeons in the Pleroma, at the forefront of their minds. Only they, who held the gnosis, or knowledge, of their true state would ascend, making this existence little more than a waiting period they had to suffer through before their ascent. The Gnostic view of the material world as evil and their human bodies as corrupted vessels good only for suffering led to much of the criticism leveled at them. It was claimed that, because they felt only knowledge was important, it did not matter what they did with their evil fleshly bodies, and so they engaged in lascivious orgies. We see similar allegations all the way into the Middle Ages, during the persecution of neo-Gnostic sects like the Bogomils and the Cathars. However, most evidence indicates the opposite, that Gnostics,

believing their physical bodies to be corrupt and evil as part of the physical world, were fundamentally ascetic, denying themselves the pleasures of the world and the flesh. But the orthodox never let a little thing like accuracy get in the way of stamping out points of view that disagree with theirs. Think, for example, of the most famous proponent of heterodox beliefs: Jesus Christ. In his time, the Pharisees were the keepers of orthodoxy, and they viewed his teachings as not just different, but dangerous, even heretical. For his part, Christ suggested that these keepers of orthodoxy belonged to the devil, calling them a "brood of vipers." Yet today, the teachings of Christ are orthodox for Christians and those of the Gnostics are dismissed as heresy. It makes one wonder how things might have changed, and how organized religion would look today, if another version of Christianity had won out and been accepted as canon, and another version of Christ, who in some apocryphal gospels espouses decidedly Gnostic teachings, had been passed down to future generations.

Further Reading

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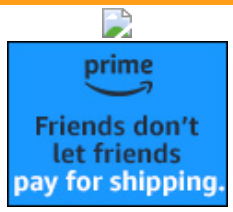

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